



The Goodnow House in Manhattan, which is a state historic site, is an example of a two-story vernacular I-House with a simple classical revival cornice. Shown here is the north elevation.

Kansas is graced with structures of all types—houses, schools, churches, and agricultural, industrial, commercial, and municipal buildings—that are “ordinary” architecture. While the term “vernacular” is often applied to these structures because their architectural style does not fit within the National Park Service list of recognized styles, these structures are just as important in Kansas history as the most elaborate Queen Anne house, Greek Revival bank, or Richardsonian Romanesque courthouse.

According to the National Park Service, the National Register of Historic Places was originally established to recognize the accomplishments of ALL peoples who have made a significant contribution to our country’s history and heritage. This means that the National Register should include any style of building that preserves and conveys cultural knowledge to the next generation.

There are four National Register criteria for evaluating a property for eligibility. Criterion C covers architectural significance and suggests that properties are eligible that “embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a signifi-

cant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.”

The purpose of Criterion C is to recognize a structure’s visual characteristics. While in the past the National Register has often been viewed as being only for structures of premier significance and those that exemplify recognized architectural styles (which at times translated into those built by the wealthy), it still leaves room for vernacular structures that convey more common building types, construction technologies and methods, national and regional building patterns, class distinctions, ethnicities, changes caused by social reforms, and the influence of popular culture.

Studying the Ordinary

Studies in vernacular architecture began to emerge only about 25 years ago as historians, designers, archeologists, folklorists, architectural historians, geographers, museum curators, and historic preservationists began to realize that they knew little about common people and their buildings. This interest was driven in part by the 1960s social history movement that challenged traditional history’s emphasis on famous people, events, and time periods.

New social historians attempted to correct what they considered a limited view by incorporating history’s overlooked people—women, children, ethnic groups, the poor, and the ordinary—into a much broader view of history. Their

You Call Them “Vernacular”



The Paterson House in Lindsborg is an example of a two-story vernacular I-House with a simple classical revival cornice. Shown here is the south elevation.

efforts are sometimes described as “discovering history from the bottom up.” While somewhat radical at the time, the long-term effect has been a change in how history is studied and interpreted. Today history is viewed as a complex interaction or interdependence among people, institutions, groups, and communities which affects societal change.

In somewhat the same way that history changed, traditional architectural history changed too. Early vernacular architectural historians pursued studies of common and ordinary buildings as indicators of complex cultural values. They saw themselves as different from traditional architectural historians since architectural history had frequently focused on the elite or art of design and style. Today those who study and appreciate vernacu-

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of Type 5, Peterson's Balloon Frame Farmhouses.

lar architecture include a large variety of individuals. They appreciate buildings not only for their visual characteristics, but also because they are a record of cultural knowledge. This is important in Kansas's built environment since most residents have lived, played, socialized, and worked in ordinary buildings; lived in complex neighborhoods; and built towns, parks, and commercial structures. Kansas buildings tell us about the past and visually connect us to the hopes and dreams of prior generations.

Recognizing the Vernacular in Kansas

Examples of recent vernacular listings in Kansas include the thematic nominations of fifteen Lustron houses



The McCarthy House in Johnson County is also an I-house, but it is only one and one-half stories and is modified with a Gothic revival roof gable. Shown here is the east elevation.

(see “Lustrons Were the Homes of the Future,” in the January/February 2001 issue of *Kansas Preservation*) and five railroad depots (see page three).

Both nominations highlight the architectural significance of these buildings as part of both nationwide and Kansas trends. The Lustron home, a prefabricated steel house, was a response to the housing crisis after World War II. Railroad property types were nominated based on functional classifications provided by Walter Berg in his 1893 book *Buildings and Structures of American Railroads: A Reference Book for Railroad Managers, Superintendents, Master Mechanics, Engineers, Architects, and Students*. Subtypes for depots were based on their original form and function.

The Paterson House in Lindsborg (center photo) is a good example of vernacular housing that fits within a typology defined by Fred Peterson in his *Homes in the Heartland: Balloon Frame Farmhouses of the Upper Midwest, 1850-1920*, a study based upon regional fieldwork. This Kansas home is easily identified as one of Peterson's twelve farmhouse forms but to complicate the example, the home also shows some architectural details on the porches that one might find on a Queen Anne or related Eastlake style. As is the case with many vernacular structures, the house combines traditional building forms from the “bottom up,” with recognized architectural stylistic details from the “top down.”

While this house is being considered only for listing under Criterion C, most vernacular structures are nominated under more than one criterion. If a building meets several criteria, it allows the nomination to call out in a significant way a building's broader contributions to Kansas history. Regardless, vernacular structures can be listed under Criterion C alone.

The National Register celebrates popular and local culture and has many examples of vernacular architecture. Its listings include ski lifts, diners, mine tailings, smelter stacks, roof signs, and Titan II ICBM sites. Pikes Peak is on the register, as are water fountains, boats, airplanes, a sign which is shared between two states, houses made of bottles and stones and concrete blocks, tourist camps, fairgrounds, a nuclear test crater, bat roost, root cellar, totem pole, and rocks. Other states have listed landscape sites from oil seeps and agricultural test plots to pumpkin patches (for events that occurred there). Each has been found worthy of passing along cultural knowledge to the next generation.

So the next time someone tells you that your building is “vernacular,” celebrate it as part of a rich and diverse history of building in Kansas. It also may be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. If you are interested in listing a property, please contact our office at (785) 272-8681 Ext. 240 for information about the process.